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The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

19 Nemis, Master of the Deep

In the Merman's Underwater Prison

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Jadek Keller

From a story by Frank Graves

On the Nineteenth Day . . .

Sea falls fast and deep
Ship speeds deeper still,
Down to hidden Coral Keep
Where Evil wreaks its will.
Merman King locks the spell,
Guardian's magic is the key.
Chosen One must use it well
To set the others free.

Water filled the air, soaking the trio to the skin as their battered craft rose and fell on the huge waves. There was nothing they could do against such elemental forces. They crouched in the bow, their backs blasted by salt-spray.

Finally, the storm blew out, leaving them on a calm sea. To Richard's astonished delight he could see land on three sides. Only in one spot did the waves reach out to the horizon. The hurricane had blown them into a lagoon. Richard and Orkan began to paddle while Melek bailed out water.

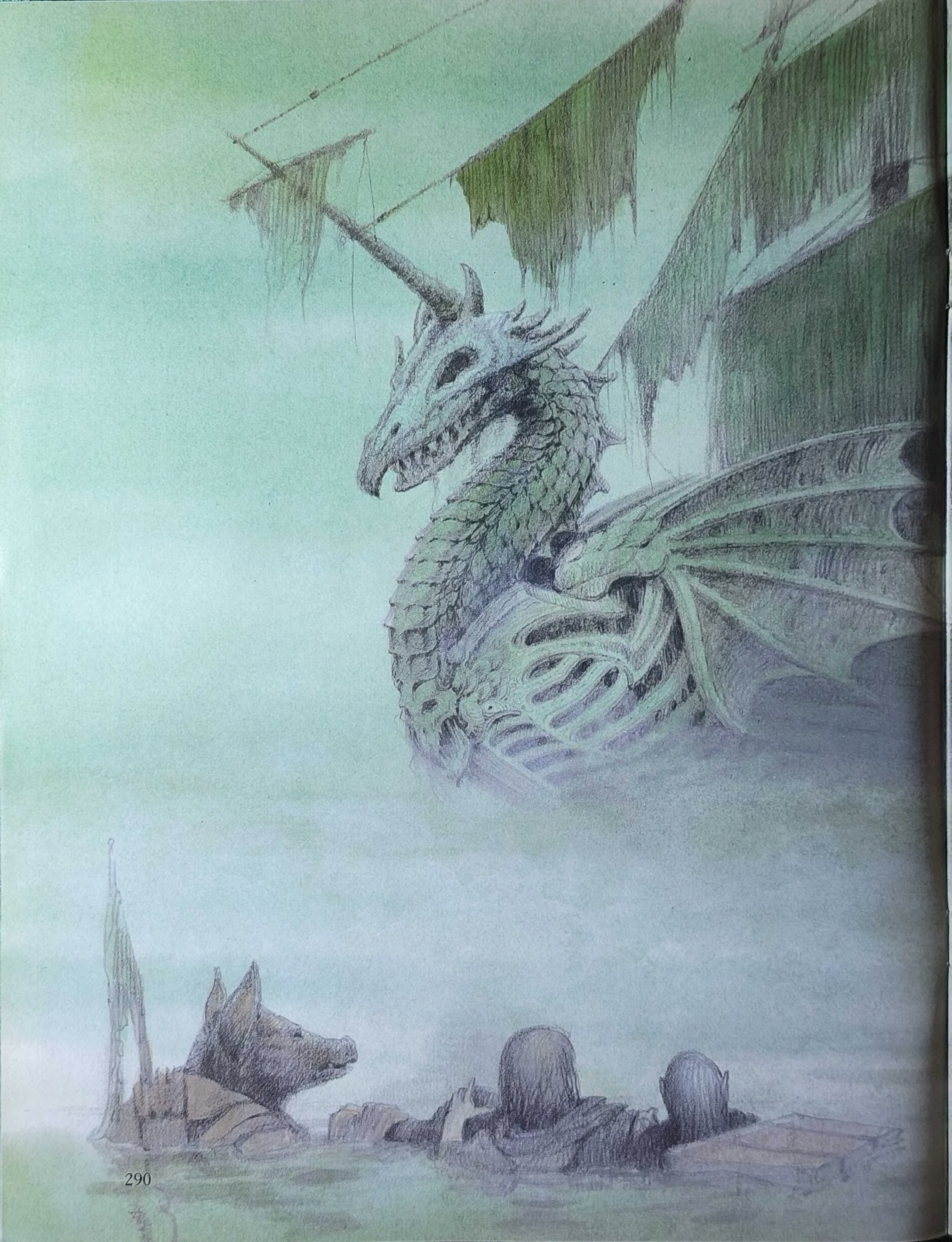
Over the seafall

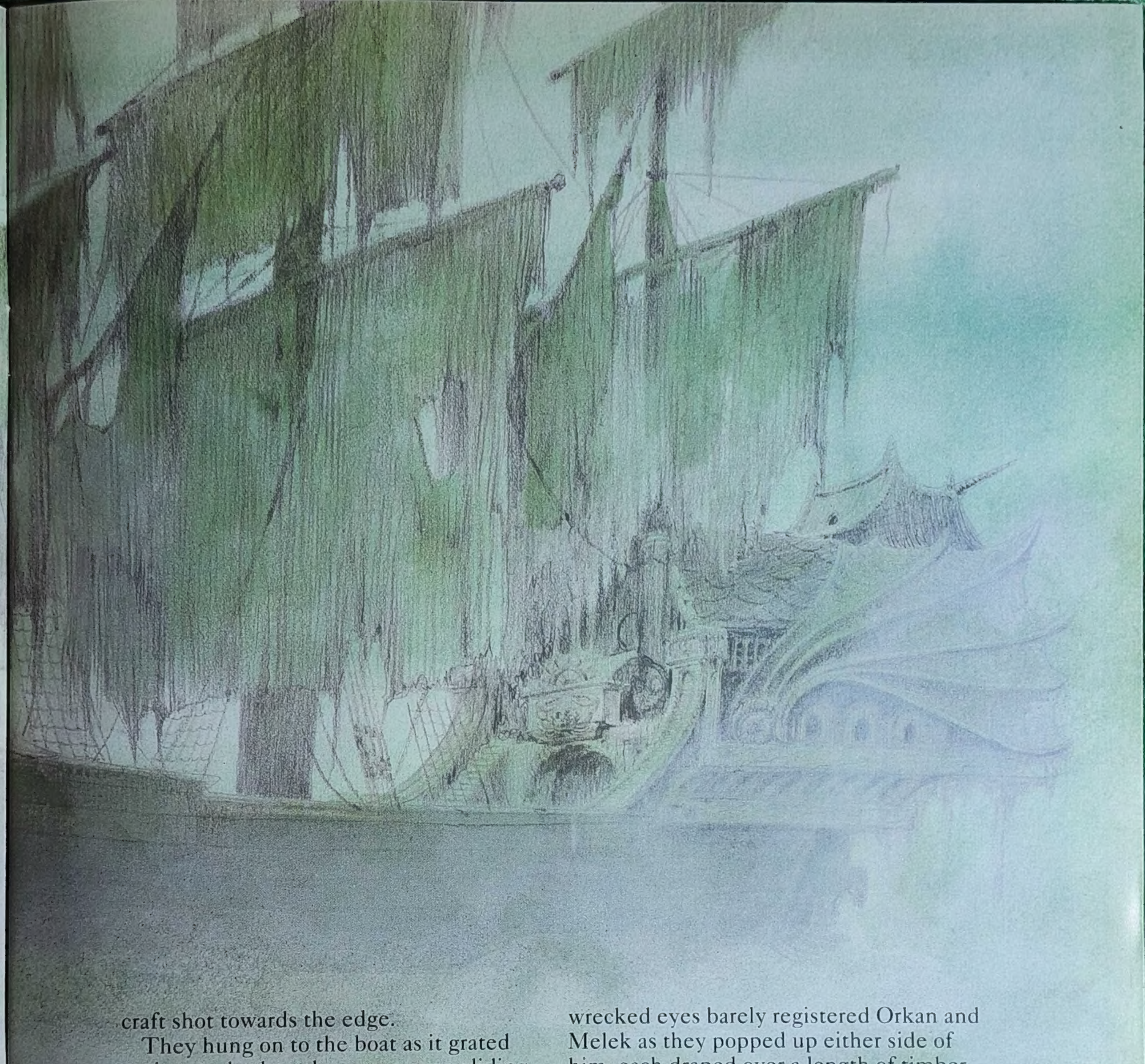
After a while, the shore seemed no nearer. Richard realized that the tide was going out, and they were being sucked back into the ocean at a fearsome rate. As they neared the mouth of the lagoon, they heard the thunder of cascading water.

"What's that?" Richard asked.

"It must be a seafall," Melek replied. "It's a ridge of rock across a lagoon's mouth that's covered at high-water, but turns into a waterfall at low tide."

"Hold on tight!" Richard shouted as the





craft shot towards the edge.

They hung on to the boat as it grated against rock, then they were over, sliding down a wall of water.

The impact shattered the small craft and drove the wind out of Richard. He plunged deep into an opaque maelstrom and for one awful second he touched the seabed, before the piece of trunk he was holding on to began to lift him to the surface. Red stars were exploding in his oxygen-starved brain by the time his head broke water.

He drank in the air greedily, coughing and spluttering as he did so. His salt-wrecked eyes barely registered Orkan and Melek as they popped up either side of him, each draped over a length of timber.

Rescue in sight

"Are you okay?" Richard bellowed to the others. Orkan tried to reply but immediately received a mouthful of brine. Melek raised a tired hand.

"A boat," he croaked. "Look."

They followed his pointing finger and saw an old schooner slicing towards them. Its sails were in tatters. There was no sign of a crew, nothing to say that they had been spotted.

The dark vessel creamed its way over the sea, a rope-ladder trailing from the side. Richard grabbed it and scrambled up a few rungs to make space for Orkan and Melek. The three clambered on board and collapsed in exhaustion.

When they had recovered they looked around. The ship was deserted and a large, brass diving bell stood unattended on the deck.

"Let's read the prophecy," Melek said, opening the book.

As they pondered the message they heard footsteps and turned round – the ship was heaving with activity. Sailors were reefing sails, battening hatches, lashing down loose objects. It was as if they were getting ready for a storm.

A DIVE TOWARDS DEATH?

Orkan walked over to the helmsman. "You saved our lives," he said, patting the sailor's back in thanks. His hand passed through nothingness and he stumbled forward.

"It's a ghost," he spluttered. "We're on a ghost ship!"

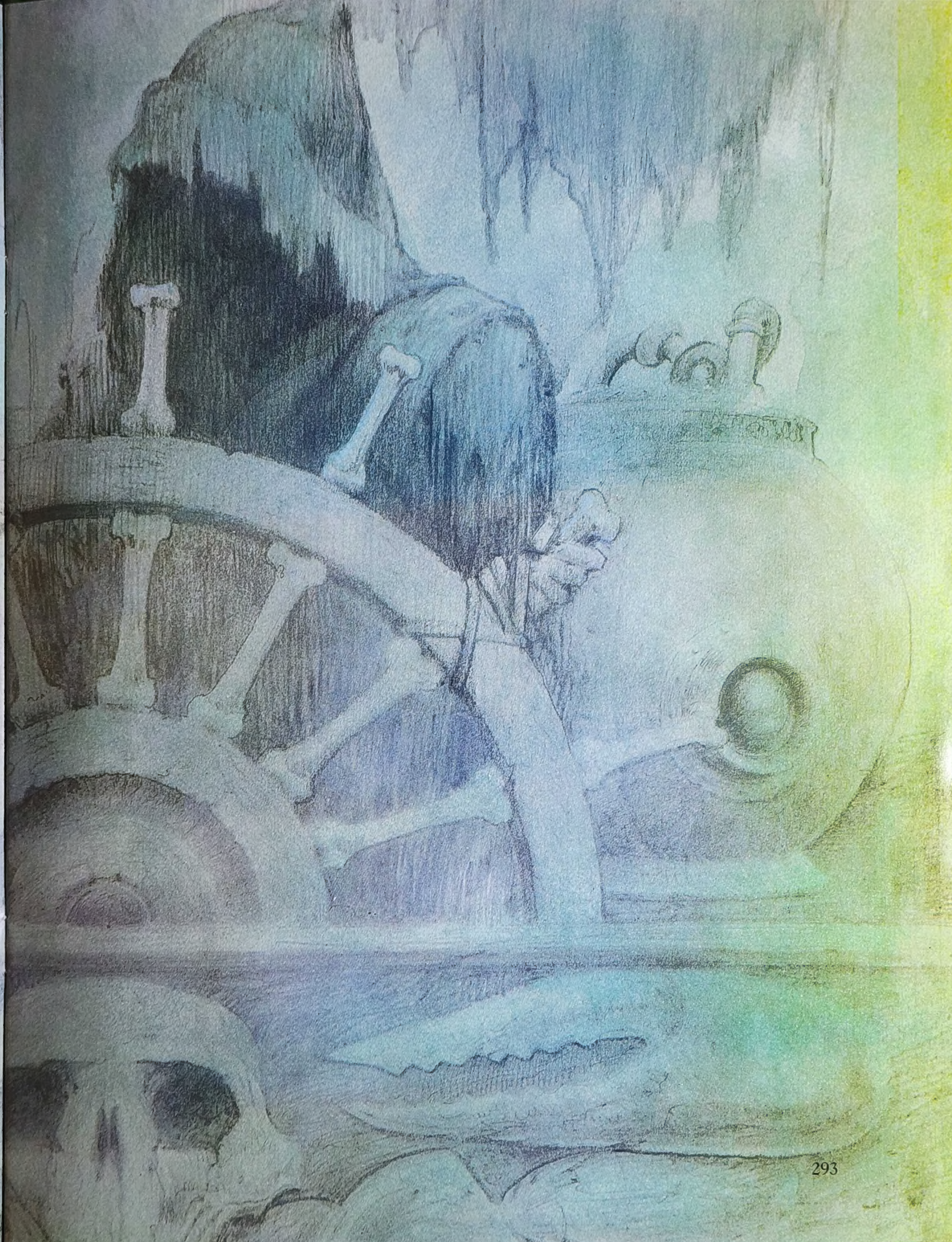
The ghost sailor turned to Orkan. He was lashed to the wheel and no face looked out of the mildew-covered canvas of his foul-weather hood. Suddenly a short, piping trill rang in the air. Instantly the crew dashed below, leaving only the helmsman.

"What's happening?" Richard shouted.

He got no reply. Instead the spectre turned the wheel, and the ship took a nose dive. Richard, Orkan and Melek were hurled against the rails.

They realized that the ship was heading for the deep. First the bow, and then the fore-deck were submerged in a froth of sea-water.

"Get to the diving bell!" Richard yelled.



They hurried over to the brass bell. Orkan spun the hatch wheel and they scrambled in, slamming the hatch shut with only seconds to spare.

As the ship sank under the waves, they inspected their new quarters. It was a small, globular room whose ceiling pressed uncomfortably against their heads.

Underwater City

"I hope we don't have to stay in here long," Melek said. "The air can't last forever."

Richard had not considered this. Had they escaped drowning only to die a lingering death by suffocation? All at once the atmosphere seemed hot and stuffy.

"Look!" Orkan said, his nose pressed to a porthole.

The ship was skimming along the seafloor through a coral maze, whose formations were fashioned into houses and streets. The three were peering at massive carved pillars when a jolt threw them against the glass. The ship had come to rest and the bell had rolled off the deck on to the seafloor.

The crew clambered off the ship and dragged the diving bell along the seafloor until they reached the gates of a palace.

The three peered through the porthole as the crew hauled the bell into a magnificent throne room thronged with strange creatures. Every surface in the room was covered in shells that gleamed in the gloom.

Meeting the Merman King

A vicious-looking merman holding a coral trident floated towards them.

"This must be Nemis, the Merman King," Melek murmured.

The merman swirled to a stop by the porthole and peered into the bell. His features were thin and pinched and a bony nose jutted between cold, slanting eyes. His menacing stare held them entranced before he finally spoke.

"At last! The Chosen One. I have waited for such a prize." The three were astonished to find they could hear underwater. "You can join the twin Guardians of the Fishes, Tishon and Shunta, until I deliver you to the Evil One," Nemis added.

He made a sweeping gesture towards a net in which two figures covered in spines and feathery fins writhed helplessly.

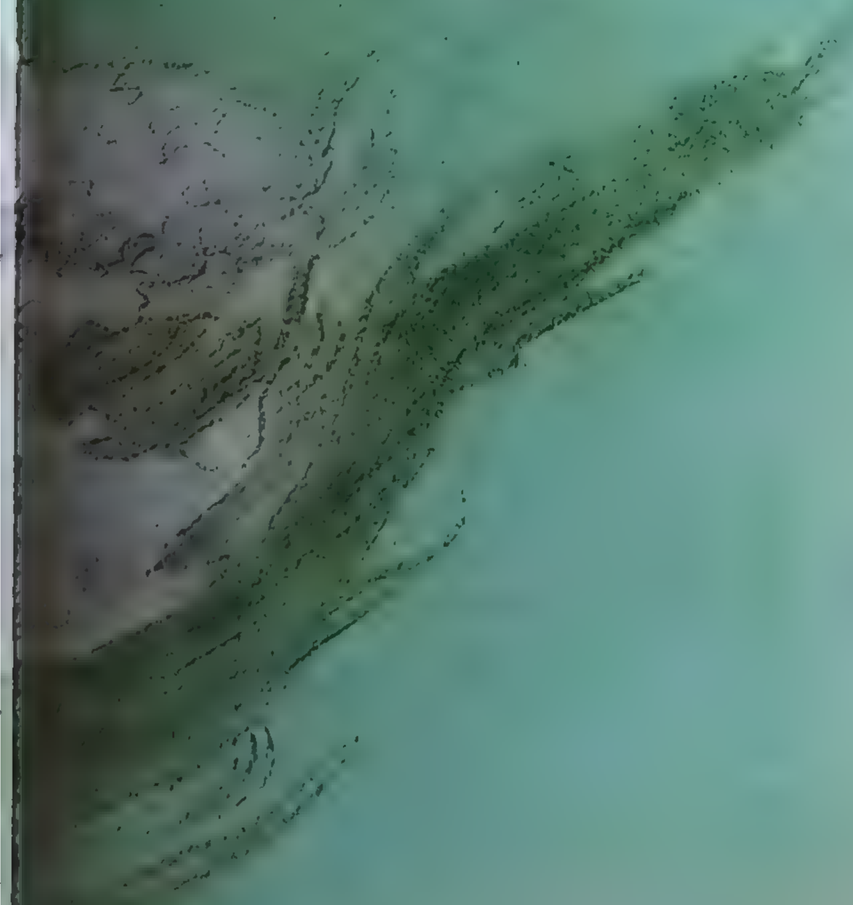
Nemis waved his hand upwards. A huge octopus was floating gently down towards the bell. Its tentacles fanned out beneath a huge black hood and thin tendrils of ink dribbled from its beak as it prepared to enfold the three in its grip.

Richard was trying to remember the words of the prophecy when he sensed Golan's voice saying, "Free the Guardians and you, too, will be saved."

Turning to his companions he said, "We've got to free Tishon and Shunta."

The other two nodded in agreement. Richard spun the hatch wheel. Water gushed in round the edges. He told Melek and Orkan to take a deep breath and flung the hatch open.

The trio burst out and swam as fast as they could towards the Guardians. Nemis was swimming back to his throne and did not notice their escape. Nor did the octopus, whose vision was blocked by the carpet of tentacles which were already closing around the diving bell.

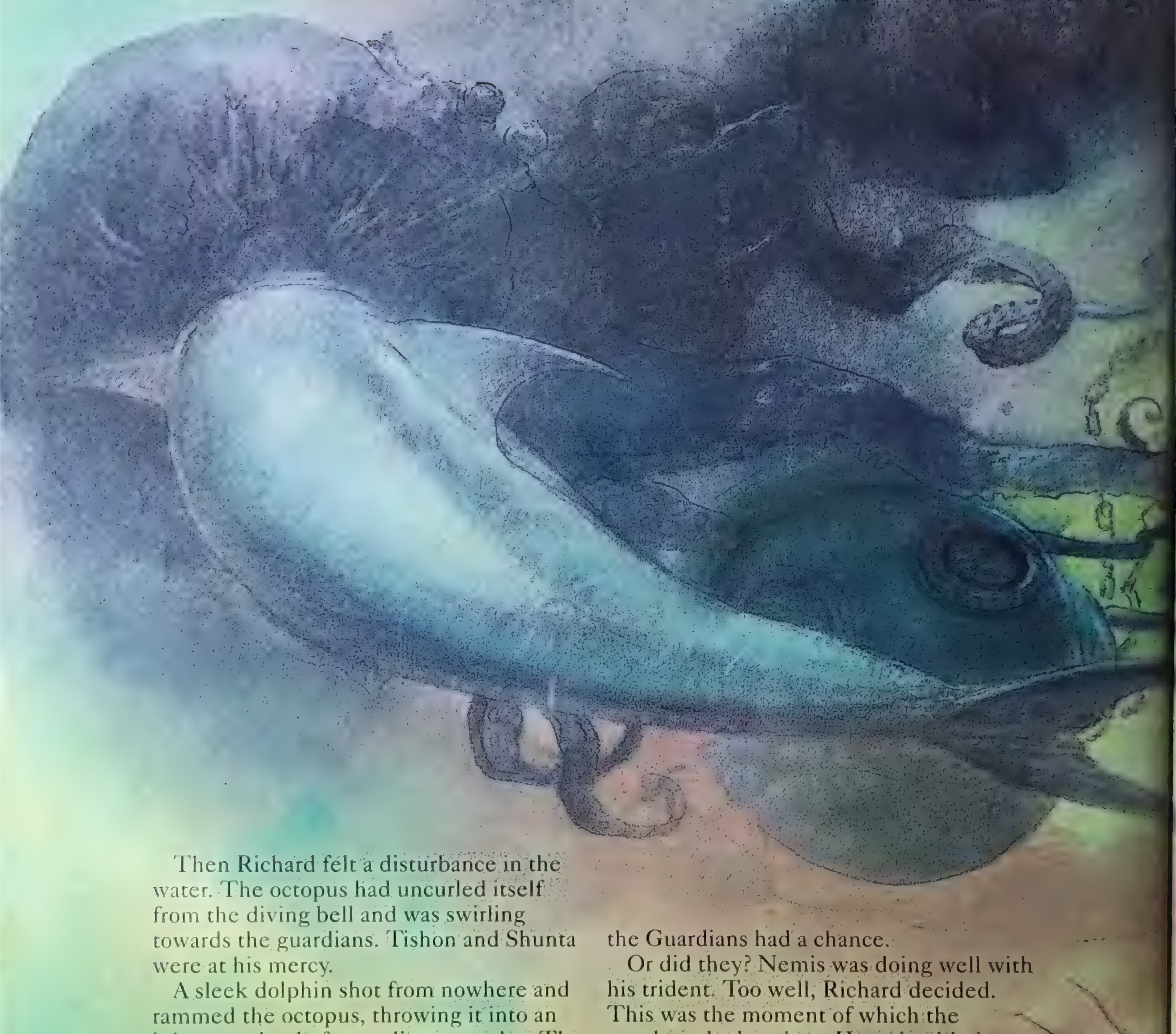


Richard drew his dagger and hacked furiously at the net. He was almost bursting from holding his breath. Suddenly a webbed hand snaked through the hole and grabbed his weapon. Another pulled Richard into the net.

Breath of life

A scaly mask was pressed to his face and, miraculously, Richard could breathe. He saw one of the Guardians rip through the net with his dagger. Tishon and Shunta were free. Then they clamped masks over the faces of Orkan and Melek. For the first time since going underwater, Richard felt a sense of hope.

By now, Nemis was aware of the escape and was hurtling towards them, his trident poised to strike. The Guardians came at him from either side but he was able to keep them at bay, and even succeeded in driving them back.



Then Richard felt a disturbance in the water. The octopus had uncurled itself from the diving bell and was swirling towards the guardians. Tishon and Shunta were at his mercy.

A sleek dolphin shot from nowhere and rammed the octopus, throwing it into an inky cartwheel of sprawling tentacles. The newcomer danced round its enemy, dodging out of reach every time a tentacle swung out.

The Guardians were quickly forgotten as the octopus lumbered after its elusive foe. Richard heaved a sigh of relief. Once again the Guardians had a chance.

Or did they? Nemis was doing well with his trident. Too well, Richard decided. This was the moment of which the prophecy had spoken. He unbuckled Kika's belt and threw it into the fray.

The belt travelled through the water and spat forward of its own accord, wrapping itself round the trident. The weapon, which had seemed so

threatening, snapped like a brittle twig.

The effect was astonishing. Deprived of his power source, Nemis began to fall apart. The process started at the tip of his tail and worked steadily up his body, chunks of flesh drifting away until his lower half looked like an X-rayed fish. There was nothing Nemis could do.

His face was the last to go, slobbering off the bone in lumps and shreds. All that remained of the merman was a pile of foul matter on the seafloor and a frail skeleton that rose and fell idly on the current.

Freeing the Fish Forces

Richard looked around him. The host of marine creatures that had previously lined the room were now curling and swooping in jubilation. The spell on them had been lifted.

The dolphin swam up to Richard and the Guardians.

"Where did the dolphin come from?" Richard asked Tishon.

"It's Doonar, last of the Sea Mammals," the Guardian replied. "He managed to escape the spell that fell on the rest of his people and has been a constant thorn in Nemis's side. We were lucky he was here today."

"Doonar will carry you back to land," Shunta said. "Where are you heading next?"

Richard consulted the Path Finder and showed Doonar the glowing arrow.

"Then you're headed for Frigoria," Doonar said. "It's the coldest place I know and it's also where my people are being held prisoner in walls of ice."

"That's where the Path Finder directs us, so that's where we must go," Richard replied. "Perhaps we can help your people."

Towards Frigoria

"Take this," Shunta said, handing Richard a small bottle. "It's a special oil which will protect you from the worst of the cold if you rub it into your skin. Good luck and thank you for saving us from Nemis. May you fare as well in your next encounter."

Shunta and Tishon raised their hands in salute, and swam to join their newly freed forces. The trio climbed on to Doonar's back, and soon the coral city was left far behind. They rose steadily through the sea until they finally emerged on the surface, splashing in graceful arcs across the waves. As they came into contact with the air, their masks disintegrated. The three could breathe freely again.

As Doonar had warned, it was cold. The sea thickened into a sludge of ice crystals that slopped

in the ocean swell. Despite Shunta's oil the companions were chilled to the marrow. A ribbon appeared on the horizon. As they got nearer the ribbon expanded, until it became a sheer cliff of ice that stretched on either side as far as the eye could see. They had arrived at Frigoria.

Solid ice trap

Before the cliff stretched a no man's land of pack ice. Near the shore it looked solid enough. On the seaward fringe it was a jumble of ice blocks that ground angrily against each other, separated only by thin, half-frozen channels. It would be impossible to cross on foot, and almost certain death to cross in the water.

Doonar headed for the widest channel he could find. He was scouting round the edge of the solid pack for a landing point when the channel began to narrow. Ice was pushing in from the sea fast, masses of it. They were trapped.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

When the trio were given help with breathing underwater, Shoomi and Shoobi were handed out their own masks. Watch very closely for the little creatures – they are not easy to spot this time!

In issue 18, Shoomi and Shoobi were clearly visible on page 281.

3-Minute Challenge

Nemis's Trident

The Merman King's trident is hidden somewhere in the illustrations in this issue. Can you find it in less than three minutes?

In issue 18, Tuska's dagger was on page 280 and the halberd was on page 284.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time.

Life Force Pod

Did you spot the clue on page 282 of issue 18, telling you which pod Richard had found in the Shadow Swamps? It was the Pod of Endurance.

Monsters and Magic

When you have finished reading about the trio's encounter with the Merman King, look at Morbane's story cards. Which of these stories do you think Nemis is based on – the Sirens or Lorelei?

In issue 18, Kronis was based on the Griffin.

Check your answers in the next issue.

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Cut out the tokens and six Intercept cards and you are ready for the role-playing game! More tokens and location recorders will appear in future issues.

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In Fortnightly Parts
The Ancestral Trail
An Epic Story of Myths, Magic and Monsters
20 Spector, Keeper of the Ice Kingdom
Trapped in the Wastes of Frigoria

In Issue 20

Spector, Keeper of the Ice Kingdom

After a hazardous journey over icy terrain, the travellers are captured by a hideous one-eyed monster. To escape, they must find a way to avoid his all-seeing eye!

plus

- Morbane tells us about creatures with an unusual number of eyes.
- More pieces for the Ancestral World puzzle map.

Coming in Issue 21

Stridor, Lord of the Snowy Mountains

Trekking across blizzard-battered peaks, the trio are buried under an avalanche. Can they survive the freezing cold and defeat the lord of this dangerous domain?

plus

From Morbane – two stories about creatures of great height and legendary strength • More pieces for the role-playing game.

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